

OPINION



BY NASEER MEMON

Development divide

IMBALANCED human development lies at the root of the polarisation and perennial conflict witnessed in Pakistan. A recent report *District Vulnerability Index for Pakistan*, released by the Population Council late last year, is a scathing comment on the disparity in human development across Pakistan. The report has ranked the four provinces based on a range of social vulnerability indicators. These include types of homes (*katchal pukka*), access to transportation, livelihood resources, and access to health and education facilities across various districts.

The report reflects the quality of life of people living in different regions. Its findings highlight some troubling facts. Of the 20 most vulnerable districts in the country, 17 are located in Balochistan. Not a single district in Punjab falls in this category. Conversely, out of the 20 least vulnerable districts, 13 are located in Punjab. Of the remaining seven, four are located in Sindh's Karachi Division, two in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and one in Balochistan.

This distorted development is more evident when different indicators are analysed. Punjab does better than all the other provinces in terms of the quality of housing. In Balochistan, two out of every three homes are '*katcha*' or '*semi-pukka*' being made of mud, straw, or unbaked bricks. Sindh has the highest percentage of single-room houses. Intra-provincial unevenness, too, is alarming. In Karachi South, only three per cent of houses are *katchal* semi-pukka, whereas in Sindh's Sujawal district, 84pc of houses fall in this category.

Sanitation facilities are considered an important indicator of healthy living. In Karachi Central, only 0.5pc of houses lack a toilet. In contrast, 59pc of houses in Tharparkar and 67pc in Kohlu (Balochistan) lack these basic facilities.

Populations dependent on agricultural incomes remain the most vulnerable cohort due to their heightened exposure to disasters and climate shocks. Karachi's Korangi area is the best-off in this regard, where only 1pc of households depend on agriculture as a source of livelihood. In sharp contrast, 17.8pc of households in Sindh's Jacobabad district and 26pc in Sohbatpur (Balochistan) owe their livelihoods to agriculture, which are exposed to climate shocks.

Unemployment is another important determinant of social vulnerability. Karachi Central has the lowest unemployment rate at 5.7pc, followed by Gujrat (Punjab) at 6.8pc. Balochistan has the highest unemployment rate at 23.4pc and Punjab the lowest at 11pc. Sindh has an

unemployment rate of 14pc. Ironically, Sindh and Balochistan are the major contributors of mineral resources, including oil, gas, coal and metals. Both provinces have sea ports and Karachi has the highest industrial concentration, which provides employment to hundreds of thousands of people from other provinces. Higher unemployment in the two provinces indicates some serious policy and governance gaps at the national level.

In the health sector, Karachi and Lahore take the lead in terms of accessibility, with residents generally able to find a basic health facility within a kilometre. However, in Karachi's Malir district, residents have to travel around 34 km to reach the nearest basic health facility. The distance to a health facility in North Waziristan is 66 km, and 67 km in Kohlu.

Karachi Central district has the highest concentration of education facilities. Within every 10 square kilometers, there are 30 primary schools. In comparison, Sohbatpur has only five schools within the same area. In terms of high schools and colleges, Karachi Central has 16 institutions per 10 sq km, whereas Tharparkar has only 0.01 within the same area.

The most vulnerable districts should be targeted for progress.

East — are the safest places. Washuk (Balochistan) and Tharparkar are among the most vulnerable districts of the country.

These statistics reveal that Balochistan is the most vulnerable province in the country. Despite its many shortcomings, Karachi appears to be ahead of the rest of the country in many aspects of human development.

Most of the rural areas are susceptible to social deprivation. This disequilibrium in development should be corrected through targeted development interventions. Development plans at the national and provincial level should prioritise backward and vulnerable districts to improve the standard of living. As deprivation spirals in rural areas, people migrate to big cities, which eventually takes a toll on urban infrastructure and services. Human development in urban and rural areas is interdependent and neither can progress at the expense of the other. ■

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BY MAHIR ALI

Iranian nights

ROUTINE predictions about the impending demise of Iran's repressive theocracy over the past couple of decades tended to be little more than wishful thinking. Could it be different this time?

The protests were triggered after the merchants in Tehran's bazaar went on strike following a precipitous plunge in the value of a currency that was already in free fall. The same segment had spearheaded the popular mobilisation that toppled the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979. The merchants remained reliable supporters of the successors until early this century, when the economic clout of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its subsidiaries became paramount. Western sanctions have been complicit in Iran's economic decline, but the role of ideological restructuring and corruption cannot be discounted.

As the protests against economic woes burgeoned, the initial response from President Masoud Pezeshkian was relatively empathetic. He offered dialogue, and a \$7 monthly deposit for most citizens. That doesn't add up to much in the face of rampaging inflation. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei also makes a distinction between protesters and rioters, implying tolerance for the former and no mercy for those setting government buildings and mosques ablaze, or returning fire when confronted by security forces.

There have been reports of overwhelmed hospitals and mortuaries, and estimates of fatalities range from hundreds to several thousand. The figures, including those for mass arrests, remain unverified, partly because of an internet blackout, but Reuters quotes an Iranian security official as acknowledging 2,000 deaths on both sides — which suggests the actual toll is likely to be even higher.

All this adds to the impression of a flailing regime faced with yet another existential challenge. The viciousness of its response against those chanting anti-regime or pro-Reza Pahlavi slogans has to some extent been facilitated by Israeli and American provocations.

The last Shah's US-based son is known as effectively an Israeli agent. The extent of his support within Iran is uncertain, but is nowhere close to a majority. His current prominence is partly due to the lack of leadership among Iranian opposition forces, but arguably owes much more to an Israeli influence operation that, according to *Haaretz*, was launched in 2023 but weaponised last year ahead of the Israeli-US air war against Iran in June. An Iranian analyst has been quoted as saying, "The monarchist slogan is not a declaration of love for Pahlavi; it is a declaration of disgust" for the regime. That makes sense.

Western analyses of the crisis invariably fail to note that tyranny did not suddenly descend on the nation in 1979. Rather, it was ensconced in the wake of an Anglo-American regime change operation in 1953 that put paid to democracy and restored Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to the Peacock Throne after he had fled abroad. The consequence was monarchical absolutism — which included close collaboration with Israel on various fronts, not least between the intelligence agencies Savak and Mossad. More surprisingly, Israeli-Iranian links persisted beyond 1979, with weapons purchased from Israel helping Iran to stave off the Iraqi aggression initially backed by much of the Arab world. As Trita Parsi writes in *Treacherous Alliance*, it wasn't until the 1990s that the relationship irreparably fell apart, and the Israeli leadership began to perceive Iran as its biggest regional enemy rather than as a natural non-Arab ally.

After many years of failing to persuade the US to jointly assault Iran, Israel last

Iran seems to be on the brink — but of what?

June launched an attack that included targeted assassinations of the military hierarchy. Donald Trump chipped in with a previously unused variety of bunker-buster bombs, subsequently claiming to have obliterated

Iran's nuclear facilities while also alleging to have brought peace. If the regime survives, it will double down on manufacturing a deterrent.

The US president threatened more violence if Tehran killed protesters, but might have had second thoughts. He's thrilled with the kidnapping in Caracas and on Monday reposted a meme describing him as the acting president of Venezuela, notwithstanding the State Department's advice to US citizens in that country to lie low or get out of there. A strategy that not quite succeeded in Venezuela can hardly be replicated in a very different country with more than three times the population.

The crocodile tears in this instance of those who have been applauding the Gaza genocide are not just worthless but obnoxious. The Iranians who have been venting their rage by night undoubtedly deserve a brighter tomorrow, but any dawn engineered by the US and Israel will entail bitter sorrow. Any enduring solution would involve rejecting international intervention as well as the regime. ■

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FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1976 Fifty years ago

There was no issue of the paper on Jan 14, 1976, on account of the Ashura holiday. The following excerpt has been taken from the previous day's edition.

Refugee camp blockaded

BEIRUT: Christian forces clamped a food blockade on a third Palestinian refugee camp and Muslim snipers took up positions in Beirut's tallest building today [Jan 12] as fierce fighting raged across the capital despite heavy rain. Police said at least 75 persons were killed and about 150 wounded over the past 48 hours as Christian, Muslim and Palestinians gunmen blazed away with rockets, mortars and machineguns across the capital from its burning suburbs to the shell-scarred, gutted hulks of its luxury hotels. The estimated toll from nine months of civil war rose to about 8,370 dead and 17,800 wounded.

The American Embassy came in the line of a cross-fire for the third consecutive day today [Jan 12] as Army and Security troops guarding the barricaded building on Beirut's up-town sea coast traded fire with Muslim Leftists, witnesses said. Callers were told not to try and visit the Embassy... — News agencies

1951 Seventy-five years ago

Genocide Convention

LAKE SUCCESS: The International Genocide Convention designed to punish crimes ... against racial or religious groups came into force yesterday [Jan 12]. Twenty-seven States have ratified or acceded to the Convention which outlaws genocide — denial of the right of existence of entire human groups. The Genocide Pact was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. The countries which have ratified or acceded to it are Australia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ethiopia, France, Guatemala, Haiti, Iceland, "Israel", Liberia, Norway, Panama, the Philippines, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Ceylon, Costa Rica, Jordan, Southern Korea, Monaco, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Viet-Nam, Rumania, Poland, and Laos. — News agencies

[Meanwhile, as reported by news agencies in Rawalpindi,] prominent citizens ... this evening [Jan 13] bid farewell to the retiring Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Army General Sir Douglas Gracey, at a tea party ... attended by a large number... General ... Gracey assured that after his retirement he would constantly endeavour to acquaint the people of the United Kingdom with Pakistan, her people and policy. He said ... he was convinced of the righteousness of Pakistan's stand on various issues.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

Culture of hate has seized social media



SOCIAL media is a good platform for expressing opinions, which is the true spirit of democracy. To bring the public on board in policymaking, social media can provide policymakers with an avenue for analysing issues at the grassroots level. However, we see that instead of voicing their opinions to improve their society, many people fuel the fire of hatred. What is even more troubling is that these hateful monologues come disguised as 'intellectual' and 'philosophical' criticisms.

The culture of intellectual debate in Pakistan has taken a problematic form, which is evident on social media, especially through the stuff that is posted on the accounts of young students, readers and self-proclaimed 'intellectuals'.

The obsession with giving everything they read and consume a 'philosophical' twist is, unfortunately, not leading anyone in a positive direction. Instead, they are using their half-baked ideas to generate capital, gain followers, and, in many cases, threaten people who disagree with them ideologically.

In history, philosophical debates have been discourse-based, with cognitive rigidity strongly discouraged, creating space for disagreements and constructive criticism. Such discourses were the whole point of being philosophical.

But in Pakistan, things have changed for the worse, especially owing to the social media debate culture. The quoted philosophies are often only partially understood because the desired aim is not to enquire into the ideas, but to use the superficial debates as tools of intellectual dominance. The comment sections of these

accounts depict an alarming situation regarding the safety of those who disagree.

The level of tolerance is so low that people publicly abuse and threaten one another. While these threats may not be real, they still cause significant mental trauma and psychological challenges to the person who receives them.

Furthermore, the bloc formation of the so-called 'intellectual class' launches harsh ideological attacks on one another, so much so that the ones promoting strict interpretations of the philosophies depict a life threat to the ideological rival. Hence, these ostensibly 'critical' debates often end up carrying more dangerous dynamics underneath.

These debates quickly devolve into accusations and character attacks. Many women social media users share messages from their inboxes filled with character assassinations, rape threats and harassment. Moreover, in a society where religious intolerance is at its peak, people do not embrace ideas that do not align with their preconceived notions.

In essence, for such intellectually dishonest people, it is easy to incite followers to launch social media campaigns that can threaten another person's life. This harmful debate culture should be seen as a non-traditional security threat, which should be addressed at the national level.

Muqaddasa Shah Lahore

Of funeral feasts

THIS is with reference to the letter 'Funeral feasts' (Jan 7), which was a pertinent commentary on a social evil that has gripped society. We see massive exaggerations at funerals that have made it just about impossible for us to learn a lesson from the death of a close relative.

Earlier, a funeral used to be a simple affair, but that is no more the case. Watching a photographer and even a team of videographers is not a rarity. This content is then posted on social media.

Praying for the dead right after burial is perfectly understandable, but adding new grave-site rituals is a surprise. I was born and raised in the same community with the same belief system by truly practicing parents, but had never seen such practices in the first 32 years of my life that I had spent in Karachi. Today, it is a different story altogether. The funeral feasts last several days, even weeks.

The Arabic verse the Muslims recite at funerals has a significance of its own. 'Indeed, to the Almighty we belong, and, indeed, to Him we shall return.' More than being a prayer for the dead, it is a reminder to the believers that life is temporary and we must prepare for afterlife. While we recite the verse, instead of getting ready for the afterlife, we prepare for the funeral and the feasts.

We, the Pakistanis, have adopted such

a different path — paved by social, cultural and deviated beliefs, and aided by a rising standard of living and remittances — that many have stopped attending funerals and everything that goes afterwards.

Muslims take it as a social and religious responsibility to participate in funeral prayers and attend the funeral of Muslim brethren, but our practices are depriving our own dead of the prayers of many.

Mehdi Rizvi Pickering, Canada

Unsung health heroes



WHILE doctors often remain the visible face of healthcare, paramedics continue to work quietly in the background, forming the backbone of hospitals and primary healthcare facilities. Laboratory technicians, dispensers, ward attendants, and emergency staff are often the first to respond and the last to leave, but their contributions remain unacknowledged.

Despite their demanding roles, paramedics face low wages, limited career progression, and minimal institutional respect. Many work long hours in overcrowded facilities, frequently exposed to health risks, without adequate protection or professional recognition. This utter neglect not only affects morale, but also compromises the quality of patient care.

A functional healthcare system simply cannot operate on clinical expertise alone. It requires a motivated and respected support workforce. Recognising Pakistan's paramedics through fair compensation, structured promotions, and continuous training is not a matter of privilege, but of necessity.

If our policymakers are serious about meaningful healthcare reforms, they must move beyond rhetoric, and invest in those who keep the system running every day.

Dr Baryal Sherani Zhub

Unethical demand

A COUPLE of months ago, I had filed a formal complaint at the Cyber Crime Wing of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) in Sukkur against several fake Facebook accounts that were often being used for malicious purposes.

When the application reached the relevant operator, his attitude suddenly changed. He took me to a vacant office room, and demanded a bribe of Rs1,000, saying that this would help 'speed up' my case. Despite this unethical demand and the passage of two months, there has been no progress or follow-up on my complaint.

This experience reflects two major issues: the lack of technical advancement in the FIA's cyber investigation system, and the growing culture of corruption within its ranks. When the institution responsible for protecting citizens from online crime itself becomes inefficient and compromised, it raises serious concerns about accountability and justice.

The higher authorities must modernise the FIA Cyber Crime Wing in accordance with the latest technological standards. Furthermore, employees' salaries should be increased to reduce their dependence on bribes. Only then can the FIA truly fulfil its purpose of protecting citizens from digital threats with integrity and efficiency.

Kazim Ameer Bukhari Ghotki

Saving Islamabad

DAILY reports on various weather apps show Islamabad's air quality to be either 'unhealthy' or 'very unhealthy', and it even gets 'hazardous' every now and then. Are we all sleep-walking into disaster while blaming others for the mess?

All I hear is that we are stuck in this environmental catastrophe due to other countries doing this to us, and I see no action at our end at all. How long are we going to keep playing the victim card? It is time to take some responsibility at our end, too. We need to start taking immediate tangible steps towards controlling the factors that contribute to making the air quality unhealthy.

These include stricter regulation for number of vehicles to be allowed to enter Islamabad, mandatory vehicles fitness certification every six months, reducing traffic jams, as an idle engine burns fuel inefficiently and emits higher concentrations of harmful gases that are linked to smog and respiratory issues. We should stop cutting down trees in the name of progress, and incentivise car-pooling. There is also a need to spread awareness at the grassroots level. There is no other Islamabad. The time to take action is now.

Amatuz Zahra Rizvi Islamabad

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is Dawn's External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of Dawn's code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action. Email: dawnombudsman@gmail.com